

Abkhaz Presidential Campaign Turns Ugly

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A view of Sukhumi's crumbling seafront. Some voters are more interested in Duma elections than Friday's vote. **Pavel Gorshkov**

SUKHUMI — Abkhazia's presidential campaign has turned ugly amid allegations that vice president Alexander Ankvab, one of three candidates for the top post in the breakaway Georgian republic, collaborated with Georgia's leadership during an early 1990s secessionist war.

The accusations, first [published](#) Aug. 10 in Moscow's Moskovskaya Pravda newspaper, were repeated in an Aug. 15 video shown by supporters of Sergei Shamba, the rebel region's prime minister, who is running against Ankvab in the election this Friday.

In the video, shown on a square in the regional capital, Sukhumi, a former Georgian defense minister claims that Ankvab, then a regional interior minister, was co-opted by Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze as an undercover agent who supplied Tbilisi details about troop

movements.

The allegations are especially damning because the defense minister, Tengiz Kitovani, led Georgian troops into Abkhazia in August 1992 to crush separatist aspirations. He is blamed in Sukhumi as the main person responsible for the ensuing war that resulted in the death of some 20,000 people and the routing of the Georgian army.

To this day the war is deeply revered in Abkhazia as the basis of its nationhood.

Strangely, neither Shamba nor Ankvab have directly commented on the reports, and speculation in Sukhumi has been rampant about who was behind their publication.

Ankvab responded over the weekend by saying the claims were the work of "dirty spin doctors" and would soon return to harm those who spread them.

"They forgot about the boomerang effect," he told supporters at a rally in a Sukhumi suburb on Saturday.

Ankvab refused to blame anyone for the campaign. Asked by a reporter after the rally whether he meant Moscow-based spin doctors when speaking about the authors, he said "spin doctors can be found in every country."

Shamba, who served 12 years as foreign minister before becoming prime minister last year, is seen as the most pro-Russia candidate, leading to speculation that the scandal was thought up in Moscow to ensure his victory by tarnishing his strongest challenger.

He has categorically denied that he had anything to do with the publications.

On Saturday, Shamba canceled all public appearances after he was slightly injured when his car collided with another vehicle in his motorcade on the way to a rally in the town of Gagra. His aides later ruled out foul play.

A television debate planned for Saturday night was postponed indefinitely, but a spokeswoman for Shamba said Monday that he would hold a televised speech late that evening.

At a rally on Friday, Shamba praised relations with Moscow, saying that since the huge neighbor guarantees Abkhazia's security, the small Black Sea region could concentrate on rebuilding its economy.

"Now is a new time. We have a great nuclear power by our side," he told the rally in the outskirts of Sukhumi.

In a short interview after the rally, he said there was no danger of Abkhazia becoming part of Russia. "Of course, there is influence [from Moscow]. But every Abkhaz government will do its best to safeguard our independence," he said.

Shamba also denied differences over foreign policy with his rivals. But the third candidate, Raul Khadzhimba, is styling himself as a critic of cooperation with Moscow, even though he has been seen as a Kremlin candidate in the past.

Leonid Yenik, a senior campaign manager for Khadzhimba, said the government had made a mistake by accepting Moscow's terms for recognizing Abkhazia's independence without asking the people.

"We are not naive, and we agree that recognition is priceless. But we believe that our mutual relations must have substance if we want to become a state," he said in an interview Sunday.

Moscow's role in the region grew from dominant to paramount after the Kremlin in 2008 recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia's other separatist province. The move followed Russia's five-day war with Georgia over South Ossetia in August that year.

Since then, Abkhazia has been awash with Russian cash and Russian troops, after both sides signed agreements about economic aid and military bases.

Moscow has pledged some \$500 million in aid for Abkhazia over three years, and last year this money accounted for 50 percent of the region's \$128 million budget. Experts estimate that up to 5,000 Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia, which has a population of just 200,000.

Regional observers say the former Georgian defense minister's interview clearly bears Moscow's handwriting. "This is just as in 2004, when they behaved like a bull in a china shop," said Izida Chania, editor of *Gazeta Nuzhnaya*, an independent weekly.

The 2004 elections almost resulted in civil war after Khadzhimba, then the Russian-backed candidate, and his main opponent Sergei Bagapsh both claimed victory. (The conflict was defused only after two months, when both agreed to run in a second round on a single ticket, which they won, making Bagapsh president and Khadzhimba his vice president.)

Chania said this does not necessarily mean that the Kremlin wants Shamba to succeed Bagapsh, whose sudden death on May 29 made Friday's vote necessary.

"I believe there are two factions in Moscow, and the other endorses Ankvab," she said in an interview in her office in Sukhumi.

Many voters, however, expressed frustration that the three candidates are overwhelmingly familiar faces.

Rafi Bezhuva, 71, who was playing chess at Sukhumi's crumbling seafront, said he would rather vote in Russia's State Duma elections in December. "They will be more interesting," he said.

Most Abkhaz residents have Russian passports and the right to vote in Russian federal elections. The Central Elections Commission has said it will provide a way for people in the region to vote.

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